

Thank you to the City Council for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Intro 1181. My name is Jenny Veloz and I work as an advocate in the Disability Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), a nonprofit legal advocacy organization that works to preserve the health, environmental, and disability rights of New Yorkers.

NYLPI is a non-profit organization that employs a variety of advocacy tools, such as individual representation, legislative advocacy, impact litigation and community outreach to address the needs of individuals and communities throughout New York City. NYLPI's Disability Justice program advocates on behalf of individuals with disabilities to ensure that their rights are protected in areas such as special education, housing discrimination and medical access, to name a few. An extension of our disability work includes eliminating communication barriers for limited English proficient (LEP) individuals with disabilities and assures that they are given translation and interpretation services.

Language access is essential to New Yorkers who are LEP, especially in obtaining government services. NYLPI has always been at the forefront of ensuring language access for individuals who are LEP. NYLPI, along with coalition partners, was instrumental in the statewide language access executive order Governor Cuomo signed in 2011, which obligates state agencies to provide language access services. Through NYLPI's work in the Safe Rx campaign, pharmacies statewide are required to provide translation and interpretation services for LEP individuals. At the city level, NYLPI has also been a leader in language access rights, advocating on behalf of LEP parents of students with disabilities so that they may understand the services available and be an inclusive part of their children's education.

Executive Order 120 was the first step in ensuring that language access services are available to New Yorkers who are LEP. Through Executive Order 120, LEP New Yorkers can independently go to a government office and be able to communicate on their own, instead of feeling embarrassed or ashamed because they have difficulty understanding what is being said to them. LEP individuals are assured that no language barrier will prevent them from applying (or recertifying) for benefits. They are able to read documents without assistance and feel assured that their benefits will not be reduced or eliminated.

However, work still needs to be done to make sure city agencies providing direct services do more than the minimum required. This is why NYLPI supports Intro 1181, which expands on Executive Order 120 and requires the Office of Language Services Coordinator to work with agencies to develop language access policies and plans. Intro 1181 lets LEP individuals know that their rights will not be diminished because of a communication barrier. Even with EO120, agencies are still falling short of meaningful language access. Recently, NYLPI settled a class action lawsuit with Access-A-Ride requiring them to provide translation and interpretation services for new and current users. This important service for individuals with disabilities was inaccessible for thousands of New Yorkers because they did not speak English very well. These New Yorkers were unable to independently leave their apartments because of their inability to

travel via public transportation, and because they lived on fixed incomes, daily taxi service was not a viable option. The six plaintiffs NYPLI represented as part of the lawsuit struggled to communicate their need for the service and were denied access. They were not given the application in their language nor an interpreter at their in-person interview. During a plaintiff's in-person interview, she was told that English is spoken in the United States and she should either learn the language or return to her country of origin. Not only did she feel humiliated, but also disrespected by the interviewer's behavior towards her. LEP individuals should not have their value diminished because they have difficulty understanding English and would benefit from the ability to apply for a critical service in their own language.

Intro 1181 offers a more comprehensive approach by having city agencies work with the Mayor's Office of Operations in a more systemic way. NYLPI supports Intro 1181, but calls on the City Council to amend the bill to include a mechanism for quality assurance. It cannot be enough for city agencies to say they will implement language services, there must be oversight to ensure that they are implemented in a comprehensive way in order for LEP individuals to fully participate in said services. This added mechanism will allow the Mayor's Office to hold agencies accountable if they are not meeting their obligation. Without this accountability, the progress New York City is making in regards to language access will fail to resonate.

NYLPI is encouraged by the Mayor's Office and the New York City Council's continued commitment to language access services that is so crucial for many New Yorkers. Intro 1181 will not only safeguard the rights of many immigrants in the city, but also guarantee that all New Yorkers are afforded the same rights and privileges, no matter the language they speak.